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CONGRESSIONAL DELEGATION

TO THE

CENTRAL AMERICAN REPUBLICS

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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DELEGATION TO THE CENTRAL AMERICAN REPUBLICS

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LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES,
Washington, DC, June 19, 1986.

Hon. LES ASPIN,
Chairman, Committee on Armed Services,
House of Representatives, Washington, DC.

DEAR MR. CHAIRMAN: Attached is the report covering the recent trip of a 13-member delegation to the five Central American republics over the period June 1–4, 1986.

The delegation comprised members of several committees, including four from the Committee on Armed Services. This report is filed by the four members of this committee.

The trip was made in connection with the upcoming vote on aid for the Contras and was designed to assess the progress being made to restoring peace and security in the region and the options available for American policy-makers to enhance peace and security in the region.

I shall appreciate your approval of the report so that it may be printed.

Sincerely,

DAVE MCCURDY,
Chairman,
Central American republics delegation.

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REPORT ON CONGRESSIONAL DELEGATION TO THE CENTRAL AMERICAN REPUBLICS

Introduction

A delegation of 13 House Members, including four from the Committee on Armed Services, visited the five Central American republics June 1–4 and spoke individually with all five presidents, including an hour-and-a-half with Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega.

The problem we all talk about is Nicaragua. But the problem is much broader; it involves all of Central America. We ignore the broader problem to our peril.

We found virtually unanimous agreement among the presidents of the four democracies—Costa Rica, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala—that:

(1) There can be no long term peace and stability in Central America unless and until all five countries are democracies;

(2) Pressure on Nicaragua is an essential if the Sandinista regime is ever to agree to pluralism;

(3) Latin American and European governments aren't helping promote pluralism when they aid Nicaragua while ignoring the four democracies; and

(4) The United States must not be so blinded by the Nicaraguan problem that it allows the three fledgling democracies—Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala—to flounder.

Democracy in Central America

Costa Rica has been a democracy—with no qualifying adjectives whatsoever—since 1948. For four decades we have been trying to enduce the other Central American republics to move toward democracy and pluralism. It is a form of American intervention, but the kind we ought not to shy away from. In the 1980s, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatamala have elected presidents freely. Uniquely in history, four of the five republics are now democracies. As convinced democrats ourselves, we ought to keep this fact in the forefront of our thoughts.

Nicaragua, of course, has also held an election. But it is impossible to call Nicaragua a democratic state in any real sense of the word. Block committees are not the stuff of a pluralistic society. Asked directly by the delegation if he would allow the opposition to win power in a free election—yes or no—Daniel Ortega waffled for several minutes, then said the opposition would be permitted to take power if it could win, and finally concluded that the right of the Nicaraguan people to institutionalize Sandinista rule should not be abridged. This is a perversion of democracy.

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The four democratic presidents recognize that there is an inherent conflict between their democratic ways and the messianism of the Sandinistas. A theme that recurred in the separate interviews we had with them was that, in the words of El Salvador's President Jose Napoleon Duarte: "We (four elected presidents) all believe Central America will not have peace unless all five countries are democracies." President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica stressed this point, with the theme of his inaugural address.

The Need To Pressure Nicaragua

There was remarkable unanimity about the need to exert pressure on the Sandinistas if we are ever to expect any movement toward pluralism within Nicaragua. We should make clear that none of the presidents openly advocated American aid for the Contras. They generally viewed that as a domestic American issue in which they wished not to be ensnared. But they were vocal about the need for pressure, arguing that the Sandinistas would not advance toward pluralism and free elections out of the goodness of their hearts. As President Arias said, "I told Ortega that the difference between you and us is that we are ready to become the opposition."

The presidents cautioned us about focusing only on the Contra aid issue to the exclusion of other forms of pressure. We were urged, for example, to assist the democratic opposition that still exists inside Nicaragua.

The Need for Other Countries To Act

Perhaps most interesting was the frustration of the presidents with democracies in Europe and Latin America. One president spoke quite bitterly about Sweden for providing $20 million in aid to the Sandinistas but nothing for his own democratic state.

The presidents were quite clear about the need for more democratic governments to exert pressure on the Sandinistas instead of cosseting them. Needless to say, much of the cosseting has been done by our allies.

As President Arias of Costa Rica said, "Ortega's not willing to dialog or negotiate unless there is a lot of political pressure from everybody—not only the Contadora countries." And President Duarte of El Salvador said, "We need more pressure. We could use European pressure."

Arias was especially firm on the need for other countries to get involved. "I invited nine Latin American presidents here in May to convince them we could not allow Marxism to stay here," he told us. "If the only one interested in change in Nicaragua is the United States . . ." He then shrugged his shoulders and looked up at the ceiling, leaving the sentence unfinished.

The Importance of the Four Democracies

Costa Rica is an established, secure democracy. The others are not. President Arias described the other three as "very fragile and weak and vulnerable."

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President Vinicio Cerezo of Guatemala was most direct in urging us to keep the broader issue in mind. He said, "It is more important to consolidate the four democracies, but all the talk is about the $100 million for the Contras."

It was also made clear to us that one reason for the recent shift to democracy was a desire by some constituencies for assistance from the United States. One president cautioned, "If we don't get that support, maybe opinions will change."

President Arias also warned us not to consider that democracy is accomplished simply by the completion of free elections. "Democracy is not an end in itself," he said. "We have shown Costa Ricans that we are more efficient. We can have social justice with little cost at all." The message was clear: we must help the democracies to make democracy pay off in social and economic terms as well as political terms.

Yet, the economic situation in Central America is a tragedy. The debt burden is immense. The region hasn't really recovered from the post-1979 recession prompted by the hike in oil prices. The lack of security has prompted a vast capital outflow, which President Arias estimated at $20 billion. Aid can't do the trick alone. Various presidents alluded to the key need for investment and trade opportunities. But aid is important. A little cash goes a long way in the small economies of Central America. And it tells the people of the democracies that we are putting our money where our mouth is; we are truly supporting the cause of pluralism in our hemisphere.

Myths That Require Correction

There are a few myths about the politics of the region and of the Contras that require correction if we are to have a better understanding of the region.

First, there has been a great deal of talk about the four democracies succumbing to Nicaraguan pressures and fears expressed that they might sign a Contadora treaty that allows the Sandinistas to consolidate their power. Let us make clear that this is a wholly irrational fear. All of these presidents are impressive, intelligent, thoughtful democrats. We heard Fourth of July speeches that would bring tears to the eyes—with one big difference. These men aren't just mouthing traditional sentiments when they speak of democracy. Many of them and their friends paid dearly in earlier years for their advocacy of democracy and pluralism in the face of repressive military regimes. On this trip we saw only one military uniform—and Daniel Ortega was wearing it.

Another myth holds that the Contras are but the precursor of American military action. Aid for the Contras should, however, be a substitute for American military action. Few here or in Central America are desirous of an American invasion of Nicaragua. It is preferable that the problem posed by Nicaragua be settled by the people of the region with American assistance, but not American military intervention. The Central American presidents, however have little faith that a Sandinista regime left to consolidate itself in Nicaragua would not spread its tentacles farther afield, which would bring our troops into the area to defend them under our Rio

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Pact commitments—and require large numbers of troops since we would then be facing a far stronger Sandinista regime.

Finally, there is the myth that support for the Contras is little more than American support for a return of the Somozo dictatorship. One can point to the recent internal reforms of the United Nicaraguan Opposition, which is the political directorate of the Contras, and to the growing number of ex-Sandinistas among the Contra officers and troops. But that really misses the point. For it is true that an outright military victory by the Contras could well result in a new military dictatorship just as the Sandinista military victory led to a Sandinista military dictatorship. As President Cerezo of Guatemala told the delegation, "If you only give support to people fighting in the mountains, then you won't have democracy, you will have a military winner. To have a democracy, you have to open the political process." That is why it is important that everyone recognize that support for the Contras is not support for a military victory of the Contras but for military pressure that will lead to a negotiated settlement and true pluralism in Nicaragua. The delegation met in San Jose with Alfonso Robelo and Adolfo Cruz of the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO) political leadership, who eloquently supported this approach.

Given these observations, how might we orient our policies toward the region? The following outlines a theoretical framework.

The Narrow Issue—Nicaragua

Starting from the premise that pressure is required to win any concessions from the Sandinistas, there are three possible types of pressure: political, economic and military.

Political and Economic: We and the four Central American democracies couldn't be applying much more political and economic pressure. But President Arias and others made clear that pressure was lacking from the European and Latin American states. While Congress cannot enact political and economic pressures by other countries, we can use hortatory language that the State Department and anti-Sandinista elements in other countries can use to press for policy changes.

Military: The Contras are, of course, the military pressure. To be a viable body of pressure, they need:

Enough money to build up a real threat in terms of adequately trained and equipped troops.

Funding for a long enough period so the Sandinistas cannot calculate that they can simply wait for Congress to weary and cut the purse strings.

A rational strategy and tactics, which evolves from skilled leadership and which means avoiding the kinds of human rights abuses that will discourage support in the long run.

Sufficient troops.

Congress can address the first and second, part of the third (which we have done by insisting on attention to Contra atrocities), but not the fourth. Our biggest problem is probably the second, since it is hard to avoid revisiting this issue repeatedly. Our repeated revisiting is part of the problem, but it also a logical result of our skepticism about a single all-encompassing solution.

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THE BROAD ISSUE—CENTRAL AMERICA

The broad issue is not Nicaragua, but democracy in Central America. The administration focuses on Nicaragua. We need to shift the focus to the broader issue of the promotion of democracy in Central America. To promote democracy in Central America requires much more than arming dissatisfied Nicaraguans. The three routes of action could again be described as political, economic and military.

Political: The political principally requires that the administration and Congress make clear though speeches and practical action that the United States is aware of the four democracies in Central America, is strongly supportive of the continuation of democracy, and will take a dim view of a return to authoritarianism.

Economic: As President Cerezo said, "It's more important to consolidate the four democracies, but all the talk is about $100 million for the Contras." A number of the presidents said that for democracy to take hold, it must be proven that it will produce for the people. That means an economic aid package for the democracies. America has already taken some substantial steps in this area, but more must be done. We must gather the national will to bring the Kissinger/Jackson plan back on schedule and fund it to completion. That plan called for $8 billion in assistance to address economic, social and political problems in the region. The Administration's budget requests have not been for the full amount recommended by the Kissinger Commission, and Congress has been appropriating amounts below the administration requests. Over the last two fiscal years, Congress has appropriated only $1.9 billion of the $2.4 billion called for by the plan. It will not be easy to locate the money needed to fill this gap in light of present budget constraints, and it cannot be done in one or two years time. But it must be done. President Cerezo said trade concessions were better than cash aids. A number of the presidents emphasized the debt burden. And Arias pointed to the flight of capital to Miami. The capital flight and collapse of the tourist business is largely the result of the security problem, which is in turn partly the result of our support for the Contras. We need to review our policies on the debt burden, on trade relations and on investment promotion as well as direct aid with a view to "putting our money where our mouth is" by showing economic support for states that have chosen the high road of democracy. Mere hortatory language will not do.

Military: Contra aid helps the four democracies in one way. It distracts the Sandinistas and makes it hard for them to try to export their revolution. In immediate terms, this probably is significant only to El Salvador, but very significant there. In the longer term, it is important to all the democracies who fear the messianism of the Sandinistas.

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